

What you should know about the Montagnards

Who are the Montagnards?

North Carolina will soon be receiving 907 Montagnard (or "mountain people") refugees. These 604 men, 100 women and 203 children have been living in refugee camps inside Cambodia after fleeing persecution in Vietnam. Cambodia recently closed the camps and agreed to removal of the refugees to the United States for resettlement. They will join other Montagnard refugees who are already living in the state. Approximately 290 will settle in Charlotte, 430 in Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem, 157 in Raleigh/Durham and Louisburg, and 30 in and around New Bern. The refugees will begin arriving late May and come on a staggered basis through July 2002.

History

Also known as "Dega," the Montagnards are tribal peoples who have lived for centuries in the central highlands of south Vietnam. They are mostly farmers, Christian, and speak a variety of dialects (not Vietnamese). They are culturally distinct from the Vietnamese. Strong opponents of communism, the Montagnards fought alongside U.S. troops in the Vietnam War.

In February 2001, some participated in peaceful protests aimed at the communist government over encroachment of tribal lands, economic discrimination and religious restrictions. Heightened persecution resulted in several hundred fleeing to Cambodia, creating refugee camps in Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri provinces. The Vietnamese government denies any discrimination against the Montagnards.

Three thousand Montagnard refugees have already settled in North Carolina. They obtained jobs quickly and became contributing members to society. They pay taxes and have active churches. These churches and communities will be welcoming these refugees, but they do not have all the needed resources to help start these men, women and children on their new lives.

How does refugee resettlement work?

The U.S. Refugee Program is a public/private partnership. After the U.S. State Department arranges for the safe travel of refugees, they are assisted by local resettlement agencies and refugee service providers. The State Department provides limited funds to these agencies to set up housing, look for jobs, rally private community support, and otherwise help refugees fit into their new country. The North Carolina Division of Social Services also distributes federal DHHS refugee social services funds to these agencies. State DSS also provides for refugee public assistance (also federally funded) in the form of medical assistance and cash assistance. Refugees are eligible for eight months after arrival in the country, and eligibility criteria parallel the state's Medicaid and welfare programs. Application for this assistance is made at the local DSS.

Before coming into the United States, refugees receive overseas health screenings to identify and treat any communicable diseases. After arrival, they receive additional health screenings at local health departments.

Is this situation unique?

It is not unique for refugees to enter our state. Each year approximately 1,300 come here to make new lives. They are admitted into the United States because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. Refugees cannot return home because of the danger they would face upon returning. North Carolina has provided safe haven to Kosovar refugees, as well as refugees from such places as Bosnia, Liberia, Somalia, Cuba and Burma.

However, this situation **is** unique because so many are coming in such a short time period. Public donations and assistance are greatly needed to help these people and the agencies who are serving them.

How can I help the Montagnards?

The Montagnard refugees, who were mostly farmers in their native land, will come with virtually no possessions. Some federal assistance is available to them for 8 months after they arrive, but it is not enough.

Basically, they need jobs, housing, medical and dental care, cars, and household furnishings. They need English instruction, and help learning to get around town.

You can be as involved as you want to be. You may simply want to donate cash, a car, furniture, or some household items. You may offer to provide English instruction or transportation. You may hire one or several refugees at your business. Or you could join together with others in your civic group or religious organization to make an apartment ready for refugees. Or become an American Friend to a refugee or family, helping them out as needed.

Whatever your involvement, remember that the refugees will need help and understanding. Many have left their families thousands of miles behind, their beloved homeland and a unique way of life. They must learn how to speak English and live in American culture. They will appreciate your help in adjusting to their new life.

Financial help: The federal assistance provided for the refugees does not cover all their needs. Tax-deductible cash donations will help with housing (apartment rent), furnishings, food, and provide for many other needs.

Employment: Adults will need work. The best kinds of jobs will be full-time with health benefits. Remember their transferable job skills may be limited as well as their English speaking ability.

Cars: The Montagnards will be more employable if they have transportation. If you are getting ready to sell your car, consider making it a tax-deductible donation instead. Encourage local used car dealers to donate cars.

In-Kind Donations: Refugees need furniture, kitchenware, toiletries and linens. Supermarket vouchers are more helpful than food items.

Dental and Medical Care: While refugees get 8 months of medical assistance (similar to Medicaid), dental care is limited and greatly needed. If refugees get jobs that do not provide health benefits, medical care will also be needed after their medical assistance runs out. To offer this kind of help, contact a refugee agency. Physicians and nurses with N.C. licenses are also needed to assist in health screenings in June and July. Interested providers can contact the N.C. Refugee Health Coordinator, NC Division of Public Health at 919-715-3119 or by email, suzanna.young@ncmail.net.

Time: Volunteers are needed for many things such as to help set up apartments with donated furniture and household items for refugees before their arrivals. Groups of volunteers can organize the collection of household items and other donations.

American Friends: Can you or a group from your religious or civic organization work to help a resettlement agency meet the needs of a refugee or a refugee family? There are many ways to help out. You can provide transportation to a grocery store, accompany a refugee on a visit to the public health department or social services office, or provide help finding a job. You can encourage their understanding of English by taking the time to communicate with them or tutor them in their homes.

Who do I contact to offer help?

You can make donations or offer help by calling one of the refugee offices listed below. These organizations are resettlement agencies and service providers who will be directly assisting the refugees. Or you can call or email the North Carolina CARE-LINE Information and Referral Service. They will take your information and forward it to the appropriate agency:

CARE-LINE at 1-800-662-7030 or email at care.line@ncmail.net

Catholic Social Services Refugee Office (USCC)

1123 S. Church St.
Charlotte, NC 28203-3405
Phone 704-370-6930
Fax 704-370-3290
Cira Ponce, Director
Ciraponce@juno.com
*Resettlement agency and service provider

Interfaith Refugee Ministry

1320 Commerce Drive, Unit 2
New Bern, NC 28562
Phone 252-633-9009
Fax 252-274-3605
Judy Castranova, Director
Judi@newbernnc.com
*Resettlement agency and service provider.

Lutheran Family Services-Greensboro Office

415 N. Edgeworth Street, Suite 200
Greensboro, NC 27401
Phone 336-378-7881
Fax 336-274-3605
Pat Priest, Director
Ppriet@lfsnc.org
*Resettlement agency and service provider

Lutheran Family Services Refugee Office-Raleigh

112 Cox Avenue
P.O. Box 12287
Raleigh, NC 27605
Phone 919-832-2620
Fax 919-832-0591
Jeremy Eggleton, Area Coordinator
Jeggleton@usa.net
*Resettlement agency and service provider

Montagnard Dega Association

Louis Y. Pen Bing
611 Summit Avenue
Greensboro, NC 27405
Phone 336-373-1812
Fax: 336-373-1832
Mda-lbing@triad.rr.com
*Service provider

North Carolina HIAS Project (HIAS)

Ellen Dubin, NC Director
Phone 704-232-3687
Fax 704-442-0009
Eldubin@aol.com
*Resettlement agency in Mecklenburg and Guilford.

World Relief Refugee Services (WRRS)

2029 North Centennial St.
High Point, NC 27262
Phone 336-887-9007
Fax 336-887-5245
Reverend Wayne Wingfield, Director;
*Resettlement agency and Match
Grant provider.

ALSO INVOLVED:

UNC-G, Office of New Americans Interpreter Access Project (Provides training to prospective interpreters and supplies interpreters across the state as needed.)

Raleigh Bailey, Director
Phone 336-334-5411

Vietnam Highlands Assistance Project

(A project of Raleigh Lutheran Family Services: Advocacy, Cultural Preservation, Development),
Kay Reibold, Director,
Phone 919-832-2620 ext. 314

** Resettlement agencies receive Department of State Reception and Placement federal funding to help refugees within their first 180 days of arrival settle into their new lives. Refugee service providers assist refugees with on-going, longer term support and receive US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement funding. Both are private, non-profit agencies and can accept tax-deductible donations from the public.*

